



The Historical Evolution and Conceptual Evolution of Chinese Watercolor Painting

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Abstract. The dissemination and development of watercolor painting in China is a unique historical phenomenon in modern and contemporary art. The creative method of this painting is similar to traditional Chinese painting, and it was quickly accepted by the Chinese people. In terms of painting style, it gradually integrates traditional artistic language, and artistic concepts have evolved from early learning from the West to promoting a national stance, gradually presenting a spiritual outlook with Eastern aesthetics and national characteristics. This article takes the historical evolution of Chinese watercolor painting as the object of discussion, and then analyzes the conceptual evolution of Chinese watercolor art.

Keywords: History of Chinese Watercolor Painting; Artistic concepts; National spirit.

1 Introduction

In the 18th century, watercolor painting entered China through cultural dissemination, but it was initially only popular in the palace and did not have a wider development. Later, Guangzhou became a trading port, and a group of painters specialized in depicting the local customs and traditions emerged. [1]These types of paintings had a good market at that time, mostly purchased by foreign merchants. Later, these works were collectively referred to as export paintings, and their main painting tools were watercolors. However, with the gradual popularization of camera technology, exported paintings also gradually disappeared. It was not until the opening of the Tushanwan Painting Museum in Shanghai in 1864 that watercolor painting went through several twists and turns and took root in China. Later, with the development and progress of modern education in China, art academies and local art associations gradually established, and the development of watercolor painting in China also took shape. [2]After the reform and opening up, watercolor painting associations were established in various parts of the country, and various large-scale national watercolor exhibitions began to be organized regularly. China's watercolor painting gradually formed an independent scale.

Mao Zedong's speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art proposed the position and attitude that socialist art should have, as well as the direction of work and

learning. Through his own creations, he stimulated the enthusiasm of literary and artistic workers to serve the people. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, domestic politics and economy tended to be stable, and culture and education also closely followed the trend of the times. [3]At that time, a higher art education system was gradually established, and the teaching experience of the West and the former Soviet Union was summarized and borrowed, forming a socialist art education system, which took shape. The development of education will inevitably increase the growth of talents, so the relatively healthy development of art education in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China was also one of the conditions for the long-term development of watercolor painting in our country.[4]

2 Watercolor Painting in the Early Days of the Founding of the People's Republic of China

In July 1949, the Chinese Artists Association was announced to be established in Zhongshan Park, Beijing. Xu Beihong was elected as the first director, Jiang Feng and Ye Qianyu as deputy directors, and Cai Fanghong, Liu Kaiqu, Wu Zuoren, Li Caicai, Gu Yuan, Wang Chaowen, Ni Yide, Liqun, Zhu Dan, and Ye Fu were standing committee members. [5]That month, the National Congress of Literary and Artistic Workers was held in Beijing. Guo Moruo gave a report on "Struggling for the Construction of People's Literature and Art in New China" at the conference, and held the "First National Art Exhibition" during the conference, showcasing 556 art works, including watercolor paintings. In 1954, the Chinese Artists Association held the "National Watercolor Sketching Exhibition" in Beijing, proposing that "the most important task of the Art House today is to educate and inspire the people with socialist spirit through painting art works."

In 1956, the "Double Hundred Policy" with the idea of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend was proposed and welcomed by the literary and scientific circles. The implementation of the Double Hundred Policy has mobilized the enthusiasm of watercolor painters, and watercolor painting creation has also experienced further vigorous development. In 1962, the magazine "Fine Arts" and the Beijing Shanghai region jointly held a "Watercolor Symposium", during which issues related to the characteristics, nationalization, techniques, thematic style, innovation, and artistic conception of watercolor painting were raised. It can be seen that the development of watercolor painting in China at that time was widely recognized and valued, and artists also had the idea of making this type of painting unique to their own country. Multiple careers in watercolor painting have gradually developed, such as the publication of books on watercolor painting. During this period, Li Jianchen's "Watercolor Painting Techniques" and "Selected British Watercolor Paintings" have had a great influence. Among them, "Watercolor Painting Techniques" was published by Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House and has been printed multiple times. Currently, more than 200000 volumes have been published, selling well both domestically and internationally. During this period, there were also publications such as "Selected Modern British Watercolor Paintings" edited by Tang Dekeng from the

People's Fine Arts Publishing House in 1958, "Research on Watercolor Painting Techniques" published by the People's Fine Arts Publishing House in 1958, "Watercolor Landscape Painting Techniques" translated by Shen Zuoyao and others, and "Experience in Watercolor Painting Techniques" written by Zhang Meisun and others in 1964. In terms of watercolor painting publishing, there are also works such as "Selected Watercolor Paintings", "Special Collection of Watercolor Paintings", "Selected Watercolor Paintings" published by Shanghai Fine Arts Publishing House. The books mention authors such as Pan Sitong, Zhang Meisun, Fan Mingti, Wang Xin, Lv Pin, Guan Guangzhi, and so on.[6]

From these cases, it can be seen that although there was still a lack of theoretical research on watercolor painting in China during this period, a preliminary theoretical exposition of watercolor painting in China has been formed, and certain progress has been made in education and various exhibition and exchange activities. During that period, both young painters and the older generation of watercolor painters made efforts to delve deeper into life, understand the masses, and use watercolor to reflect the face of New China. So the style of the works tends to be realistic, which is also related to the guidance of art education in New China at that time, laying the foundation for the tradition of Chinese watercolor painting.

In 1966, the arrival of the Cultural Revolution broke the thriving development of Chinese watercolor painting. Many well-known figures in the watercolor painting industry were overnight labeled as "literary black lines" or "reactionary academic authorities", becoming the negative figures who were criticized and challenged. Some precious books and paintings were smashed, looted, and burned, and the losses were difficult to estimate. In the turbulence of time, watercolor painting was mistakenly regarded as something of revisionism, unable to serve politics or class struggle. Under the rule of extreme left-wing ideology, painters were forced to put down their brushes, and some were criticized and persecuted. As a result, the development of watercolor painting was hit even harder. During the more than ten years from the 1950s to the 1960s, there were also a large number of outstanding watercolor painters who made contributions to the development of Chinese watercolor painting, such as Huang Duwei, Lin Ling, Zhou Lingzhao, Zhao Qi, Lie Yang, Zhou Shaomiao, Li Songshi, Chen Zihua, etc.

3 A Rational Return to the Historical Pattern of Chinese Watercolor Painting

The convening of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978 announced the official end of this "revolution", and it was only then that political, economic, educational and other undertakings returned to the right track. In 1978, at the beginning of the year, Shanghai was the first to break the silence and hold the "Watercolor Exhibition". In April of the same year, Nanjing also held the "Watercolor Exhibition", marking the beginning of the recovery and development of Chinese watercolor painting. In 1979, the China Artists Association resumed its work and proposed at the American Congress to promote artistic democracy and follow the laws of

art. The ontological consciousness of painters and art has been restored, and the development of Chinese watercolor painting has also returned to rationality.

Around 1980, watercolor painting research associations and societies were established in many parts of China, carrying out watercolor painting creation and research activities in various regions, and organizing regional exhibitions and exchange research activities.[7] At this time, the development of China's watercolor painting market was also more rapid. Due to the increase in the number of exhibitions and the quality of works, as well as objective needs, the reform of watercolor painting teaching has been promoted. Many art schools and teacher training institutions have successively established majors in watercolor painting and started to cultivate master's students in watercolor painting research, cultivating young watercolor painting artists and delivering new strength to China's watercolor painting industry. [8]The Art Education Department of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts has been focusing on watercolor painting as its main course since 1981; The Normal Department of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts established a specialized watercolor painting course in 1987; Around 1995, the Department of Fine Arts Education at Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts officially established the Watercolor Professional Class; In 1995, the Printmaking Department of Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts established a watercolor studio, and universities such as Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Chinese Academy of Fine Arts, and Central Academy of Fine Arts also successively held watercolor professional classes or watercolor teaching assistants to improve the quality of watercolor teaching.[9]

In terms of watercolor painting theory, the influential theoretical works of that period should belong to Wang Zhaomin's "Paintings and Words". This work was published by Hunan People's Fine Arts Publishing House in 1983 and translated into French for publication in the Paris "Art Series". The main content of the work is the author's unique insights into art and Chinese watercolor painting during the process of integrating Chinese and Western art. The content involves multiple aspects such as art theory, aesthetic views, ethnic style, methodology, etc. The theory also includes the writing of the history of watercolor painting, and as a type of painting, it should also have a description of its historical development. The historical discourse on watercolor painting only emerged after the 1980s. Zheng Zongyun's "A Comprehensive Discussion on the Development and Evolution of Watercolor Painting in China" was published in the fifth issue of "Plastic Arts", Wang Weifang's "The Historical Evolution of Watercolor Painting's Introduction to China" was published in "New Art", Yuan Zhenzao's "The New Rise of Chinese Watercolor Painting" was published in "Zhejiang Artists" magazine, Li Jianchen, Zhang Kerang, and Yuan Zhenzao edited "A Centenary Review of Chinese Watercolor Painting", and Yuan Zhenzao wrote "The History of Chinese Watercolor Painting". These are all the progress made by Chinese watercolor painting in terms of historical theory during that period, which changed the situation of "no theory, no painting history" in the history of watercolor painting and played a theoretical role in promoting the development of watercolor painting. In terms of art collection publishing, the number of books published during this period has significantly increased compared to before the reform and opening up. During that period, there were works such as "Selected Watercolor Paintings" published by People's Art Publishing, "Watercolor Paintings" and "Watercolor Collection" published by Shang-

hai People's Art Publishing, all of which were boutique works specifically introducing watercolor paintings. Large scale art collections include "Chinese Watercolor Painting", "Complete Collection of Chinese Modern Art Watercolor Volume", as well as works and commemorative art collections published in cooperation with large-scale watercolor exhibitions, such as art collections published simultaneously with the 4th China Watercolor Exhibition and Powder Painting Exhibition. At the same time, there are also many collections of watercolor paintings in the region, such as the "Jiangsu Watercolor Painting Works Selection" published by Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, the "North China Watercolor Painting Boutique Collection" published by Liaoning Pictorial Publishing House, the "Guangzhou Watercolor Painting Association Works Collection", "Shanghai Watercolor 20 Companies", and so on. There are also individual watercolor painting albums by watercolor painters during this period, such as the "Li Tiefu Painting Collection", "Guan Guangzhi Painting Collection", "Li Jianchen Watercolor Painting Collection", "Pan Sitong Watercolor Painting Collection", "Ranxi Watercolor Painting Collection", "Li Youxing Painting Collection", "Wang Zhaomin Painting Collection", and "Ancient Watercolor Painting Collection". Yuan watercolor painting selection, and so on. The implementation of policies during the reform and opening up period also accelerated international scientific and cultural exchanges. Therefore, during that period, China had more cultural exchange activities internationally, which also influenced the development of Chinese watercolor painting from various perspectives. [10] Various modern painting genres, with their diverse expressive styles, different techniques, styles, theories, and concepts, strongly impacted China's old art forms, broke the mindset of watercolor painting, promoted the development and transformation of Chinese watercolor painting, and led to its diversification. [11] During this period, Chinese watercolor painters also went abroad, such as Guan Weixing, Pan Changzhen, Huang Tieshan, Hu Juzhan, Chen Xiu'e, Liu Shouxiang, Yuan Long, Liu Yi, and others. They visited many places in Europe and America, and some even held art exhibitions abroad, which attracted some international attention and made Chinese watercolor painting, an art masterpiece with Eastern colors, have had a wide impact and praise in the international field.

4 The Formal Language and Conceptual Transformation of Chinese Watercolor Painting

During the reform and opening up period, facing various theories and the development of Western modern art, painters began to reflect on the development path of Chinese watercolor painting. In the process of frequent exhibitions, exchanges, and discussions, the spiritual outlook of watercolor painting continues to innovate, and significant breakthroughs have been made in several aspects such as creative concepts, themes, styles, and forms of expression. The form of works is more contemporary and also more Chinese style. [12] The expression forms of watercolor paintings during this period have added new contexts compared to the previous realistic style, such as freehand style, abstract style, etc. The realistic style is a traditional form of expression in Chinese watercolor painting, which has continued to this day. The most valuable

aspect of the realistic works of that period is that they fully utilized the language of watercolor painting and incorporated techniques such as coloring, wiping, dots, and dyeing. They also used techniques such as oil color mixing, egg white, and acrylic pigments, resulting in multiple effects and enhancing the expressive power of watercolor painting.

5 Conclusion

Overall, although the history of Chinese watercolor painting is not as long as oil painting and Chinese painting, it has undergone earth shaking changes since its introduction to China. From the above historical evolution, it can be seen that the development history of Chinese watercolor painting has also encountered twists and turns.[13] However, during periods of social, political, educational, and economic stability, watercolor painting can always achieve rapid development in China in a short period of time. In fact, this is also related to the art of watercolor painting. The way of harmonizing water and color in painting has similarities and differences with traditional Chinese painting. Therefore, this type of painting originated from the West and was loved by the Chinese people, and quickly spread and developed.

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